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Soviet Forces in Cuba

Experts Doubt Strength Is Reduced
But Lack Means for an Accurate Tally

By HANSON W. BALDWIN
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WASHINGTON, May 30 — However, many caves in Cuba. The great guessing game of have been used as storage Washington — the strength of places for arms and equipment of various kinds and intelligence the Soviet forces in Cuba is of sources concede that still continuing.

Intelligence officers differ in their estimates of the Russians' numerical strength, but most will admit privately — as a recent Senate subcommittee report showed —

News Analysis That there is no indication of any recent reduction in troop totals.

The subcommittee report put the current estimates of Soviet strength at a minimum of about 17,500, but noted that some estimates went as high as 40,000 and "we conclude that no one in official United States circles can tell, with any real degree of confidence, how many Russians are now in Cuba."

Intelligence sources confirm this uncertainty and add what appears to be the general conclusion of most of them — that the Russians are rotating troops but are not reducing the total number.

Tally Still Approximate

An exact, or even approximately accurate, tally of Soviet troop personnel would involve an actual "head count" by an extensive network of agents in Cuba, or by far more close-range and detailed inspection methods than any now being employed.

It is possible, intelligence sources agree, to estimate with considerable accuracy the total number of tons of weapons or supplies transported by a vessel, but it is almost impossible to determine how many men the same ship carries, particularly if the vessel unloads its passengers at night in a closely guarded port area.

On the other hand, photographic reconnaissance over Cuba, which is continuing, can determine — though not with complete infallibility — the presence in the island of operational missiles. High-altitude anti-aircraft missiles of the SAM-II type are in position, as they have been since last fall. But the intelligence chiefs believe that all the long-range surface-to-surface missiles have been withdrawn.

Some of these missiles may be secreted in them. The Senate Preparedness Investigating subcommittee, under the chairmanship of Senator John Stennis, Mississippi Democrat, concluded in a recent interim report that "strategic weapons may or may not now be in Cuba."

"We can reach no conclusion on this because of the lack of conclusive evidence," the committee report declared.

The committee pointed out, however, that mobile missiles of about 1,100-mile range, of the type the Russians had in Cuba last fall, can be placed and erected for firing in a matter of hours. Pentagon sources estimated that the time required, depending on the site selected and the distance from the storage area, might be 48 to 72 hours.

The danger that long-range bombardment missiles might be hidden in caves and might suddenly be withdrawn and erected has forced the maintenance of a continuous high-level photographic reconnaissance effort, which provides a more or less complete mosaic of the island at fairly frequent intervals.

High-level flights are flown dependent upon weather daily. All of them are now flown by the Strategic Air Command, none by the Central Intelligence Agency. As night flights are flown, largely because the use of photo-flash bombs might increase tension and cause incidents, and because the planes would have to fly at low altitude without anti-aircraft range. Now daytime low-level photo-reconnaissance flights have been flown since February.

Full Confirmation Lacking

Many service intelligence experts believe the photographic coverage of Cuba is excellent and, on the whole, adequate. But they agree with John A. McCone, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, who insists that only physical on-site inspection can provide complete confirmation that the Soviet missile threat has ended.

The approximately 42 MIG-21 jet fighters in Cuba are believed to be manned in part by Cuban pilots. Cubans are also known to be operating ground-control intercept stations, anti-aircraft gun batteries and various radar and other facilities.

However, Soviet personnel still control the high-altitude anti-aircraft missiles, coast defense missiles and apparently the Komar-type high-speed patrol craft, armed with missiles. Some Cubans are believed to be in training aboard the patrol boats. As far as is known, there has been no recent marked increase or decrease in the armory of modern Soviet weapons in Cuba.

Despite reports to the contrary, there is no evidence that the Russians have established any submarine bases in Cuba.

The intelligence community here — particularly the older and more experienced experts — are even more concerned with the problem of evaluating intelligence data than they are with the problem of collecting it. There is still considerable worry, particularly in military circles, that minority intelligence evaluations may be ignored in the centralization of intelligence activities that has taken place.

Moreover, this centralization has emphasized a corollary danger — that intelligence evaluations, instead of presenting cold-blooded assessments and deductions based on available facts, may be colored or influenced by policy considerations.

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